Mr Sampson

Lee

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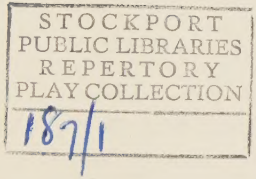
MR SAMPSON

By Charles Lee

CHARACTERS

Catherine Stevens
Caroline Stevens
Mr Sampson



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THIS delightful little comedy is a new variation on the eternal triangle theme. When two men fight to win a woman, or when two women compete for a man, the interest of the audience is generally biased in favour of one, even though the motives be queerly mixed. In "Mr Sampson" we find a bachelor in a dilemma because he is confronted with two equally attractive sisters, and therefore cannot make his choice. It reminds one of the famous 'free will' argument known as 'Buridan's Ass,' the said ass being placed at equal distances from two equally attractive bundles of hay. As the attraction was precisely equal the animal was unable to choose either, and therefore died of starvation.

Mr Sampson's final remark, "I ought to have been born a heathen Turk," suggests that bigamy might have solved the problem, but the suggestion need not be taken seriously. The humour of the play lies partly in the logical working out of a situation, partly in the unconscious humour of the characters. It needs to be acted with extreme simplicity and restraint.

The author has written a number of stories, but "Mr Sampson" was his first play, and was awarded the Lord Howard de Walden Cup at the British Drama League's Festival of Community Drama, when it was performed by the Welwyn Garden City Theatre Society several years ago. His only other play is entitled "The Banns of Marriage."

MR SAMPSON[1]

The scene represents the kitchen of a West Country cottage. At the back of the stage, in the centre, is a latticed window, with geraniums in pots on the inner sill. To the right of the window (from the spectator's point of view) is a door communicating with the front garden; to the left a tall grandfather's clock; beyond that again a cupboard. On the right side of the stage a dresser, well garnished with crockery; a small pile of books on one of the shelves. Beyond the dresser another door. On the left side a kitchen range, in which a fire is burning.

Beside a table in the middle of the room CAROLINE STEVENS, *a gentle, timid, plump, soft-spoken woman of forty or so, sits darning a sock. As the curtain rises the clock strikes four.* CAROLINE *glances momentarily towards the clock and begins to talk to it, as people who are much alone are in the habit of talking to a cat or a canary. There are pauses when her work requires special attention; and now and again she repeats a phrase dreamily, as her thoughts wander.*

CAROLINE. Four o'clock, Grandf'er? Sister's late, an't she? She don't use to be so late market-day—you know that so well as I do. 'Tisn' often you put *she* to shame. . . . Wish I could say so much for myself. Four o'clock Saturday arternoon, and the baking not begun, and Mr Sampson's socks not finished mending—aw, scand'lous! I'm ashamed to look 'e in the face, Grandf'er, that I am—ashamed—to look 'e—in the face. . . .

[1] Applications regarding amateur performances of this play should be addressed to Messrs Samuel French, Ltd., 26 Southampton Street, Strand, London, W.C.2, or 25 West 45th Street, New York.

What's keeping of her, I wonder? She haven' been so late from market not these fifteen year. And Mr Sampson coming in any minute now to pay his rent, and looking for a bit of a chat, and me never knowing for the life of me what to say to 'm. Aisy enough talking to *you*, Grandf'er; but a rale, live man, that do ask questions and look to be answered back—that's different, and I haven' got used to him yet. . . . He's another of your reg'lar ones, Grandf'er—slow and sure, like it might be yourself. And I often think he favour you about the face—round and solemn-like. And he growl in his throat when he's going to say something, just like you before you strike up. . . . But you're an old friend, Grandf'er—oldest friend we got, and we'd never set eyes on *he* three months ago; so you needn' be jalous—no—Grandf'er needn' be jalous. [*With a sigh she gets up, goes to the fire, and tends it; then wanders to the window and looks out for a moment, still talking.*] Yes, if you'll mind, it's just three month come Tuesday since he come to live next door; and considering of it one way it might be three year, and considering of it another way 'tis more like three weeks. But that's the way with Time, Grandf'er, and always will be, for all your stiddy tick-tocking. Ayther 'tis crawling around like a worm, or else . . . or else 'tis walloping along like a butcher's cart. . . . Aw me! . . . [*By this time she is seated again.*] Sister's late, Grandf'er! Never knowed her to be so late before. If something should have happened!

[*She starts at the sound of a tap at the garden door. It opens, and* MR SAMPSON *appears on the threshold. He is an oldish man, stiff in his movements, very deliberate of speech; a fringe of grey whiskers encircles his round red face. A shy confusion comes over* CAROLINE.

MR SAMPSON [*after profoundly clearing a throat unaccustomed to much vocal exercise*]. Arternoon, marm!

CAROLINE. Mr Sampson?

MR SAMPSON [*peering round*]. Sister in?

CAROLINE. No, Mr Sampson, not yet. I'm getting a bit anxious. She don't use to be later than four, and 'tis past that.

MR SAMPSON. Then you're all alone?

CAROLINE [*acutely conscious of the fact*]. All alone. [*With an obvious effort*] Won't 'e step inside, Mr Sampson?

MR SAMPSON [*after thinking it over*]. No, thank 'e. Can do very well where I be. Got a mossel o' bacca in my cheek, you see. More convaynient for spitting out here. [*He illustrates the convenience from behind a respectful hand.*] Thought I heard talking as I come up the path. Judged 'twas sister come home.

CAROLINE. Talking? Aw, 'twas only me, chattering away to myself. Leastways [*with a bashful titter*], I was convarsing a bit with Grandf'er here.

MR SAMPSON [*craning his neck into the room*]. Grandf'er? Oh, ay, the clock! Convarsing with Grandf'er, eh? [*With a short laugh*] Well, now, there's a sarcumstance for 'e!

CAROLINE [*nervously echoing his laugh*]. 'Tis foolishness, I allow. But I often chat a bit with Grandf'er when I'm alone. [*Gathering a little confidence*] He's capital company—'most like a Christian. Sister do often say he's as good as a man in the house. You see, Mr Sampson, 'tis he that do rule our comings and our goings, telling us to do this and do that all the while: now 'tis to get up and light the fire, and then 'tis to bustle and get dinner, and then, agin, 'tis to rake out the ashes and go to bed. Yes, Grandf'er's master here, I believe. So 'tis natural for two lonely females to look up to him and think a brave lot of him, when they haven' nobody else to be dependent on. And there ain't a stiddier clock, nor a handsomer, in all the country.

MR SAMPSON. A stately old chap, sure enough. [*A*

pause ; he shifts his feet ; she looks down and makes a few stitches.] Those my socks ?

CAROLINE. Yes, Mr Sampson. They're 'most done. [*Another pause.*] Hope you found the pasty to your satisfaction.

MR SAMPSON. Capital pasty, to be sure ! [*He advances a step into the room.*] You take a lot of trouble about me, marm, you and your sister.

CAROLINE. No trouble at all, Mr Sampson. We couldn't do other, and you all alone next door with nobody to do for 'e, and no more notion how to do for yourself than a new-born baby.

MR SAMPSON. I'm a terrible poor hand at the cookery, that's sartain. [*He advances another step.*] Frying-pan, I don't say ; but a man can't live by frying-pan alone. And as for darning a sock—well, I've tried. 'Twas like a fishing-net ; the more I mended the more the holes came. Well, I reckon I'm pretty and comfor'ble now. Never was so comfor'ble in my life.

CAROLINE [*earnestly*]. Glad to hear 'e say so. Anything we can do for 'e, you know, you've only to say the word.

MR SAMPSON. Thank 'e, marm ; you're very kind. [*He makes a further advance, and assumes a confidential air. Her timidity immediately returns in a flood.*] There *is* something I wanted to say—something partic'lar I got to tell 'e—came in for the purpose. But, seeing as how it do consarn both of 'e, I reckon I'll wait till sister comes back.

[*He makes deliberate preparations for settling himself in a chair.*

CAROLINE [*in an agony of nervous apprehension at the prospect of a tête-à-tête*]. Can't think what's keeping of her all this while. Never before have she been so late. Mr Sampson——

MR SAMPSON. Marm ?

CAROLINE. Would 'e mind—if 'tisn' asking too much of 'e—would 'e mind going up the road a step or two, to see if you can catch a glimp' of her ?

MR SAMPSON [*rising without alacrity*]. Sartainly, marm, if you do wish. No occasion for 'e to worry, though. She can take care of herself very well. Howsomever, if 'twill aise your mind I'll go so fur as the cross-roads and take a observation. [*Going*] Don't you fret ; she'll turn up all right. [*He goes.*

CAROLINE [*going to the window and watching him out of sight*]. He's walking awful stiff, Grandf'er. A shame to turn him out agin' just when he was settling himself down comfor'ble. But I couldn' do no otherwise. 'Tis all right when sister's here too ; but to set down alone in a room with a man—no ! I couldn' bring myself to it, even if 'twas a proper thing for a maiden to do. [*She turns away from the window and begins clearing the table, continuing meanwhile her colloquy with Grandf'er.*] Something partic'lar to tell us ? I wonder, now—— [*In some agitation*] Can't be going to give notice ! Aw, nonsense ! Don't be telling such foolishness, Grandf'er ! *He* ain't one of your changeable ones : you know better'n that. " Never so comfor'ble in my life "—those were his words ; you heard him yourself. . . . Wonder what 'a can be, though. [*A sudden amazing thought strikes her.*] Aw, if it should be—— Aw, ridic'lous ! He've never given no sign of *that* by word or look. Besides, if 'twas *that*, Grandf'er, don't 'e see he wouldn' wish to tell but one of us, whichever 'twas ; and he said partic'lar 'twas *both* of us he wanted to say it to. . . . Aw, well, us'll know presently. [*She goes up to the clock.*] Aw, Grandf'er ! Ten past four ! Something's happened ; I know it have ! [*She sinks into a chair and begins to whimper.*] Aw, Cath'rine ! Aw, deary dear ! . . . [*She turns reproachfully on the clock.*] Tick-tock, tick-tock ! *You* don't care ! If 'twas Judgment Day you'd go on with your tick-tock

till the fire catched 'e. If the truth was known you're nothing but a cage of wheels arter all, and no more heart to 'e than a Waterbury watch. [*Remorsefully*] There, I didn' mane to spake sharp to 'e; but you know how 'tis when things go wrong. [*Almost in tears*] You—you struck seventeen yourself when we moved 'e last spring-cleaning. . . . Ah! [*Hearing a sound outside, she runs to the window.*] 'Tis all right, Grandf'er; here she is at last, thanks be!

[*The door is flung open;* CATHERINE *comes in hurriedly and sinks exhausted on a chair. She is older by several years than* CAROLINE, *and far more vivacious. Her movements are quick and abrupt, like a bird's, and she gesticulates freely when speaking. On her arm is a basket containing the week's supply of provisions.*

CAROLINE [*in an ecstasy of apprehension*]. Cath'rine, what is it? Aw, sister, what's the matter?

CATHERINE [*in a faint voice, panting heavily*]. Aw, my dear nerves! Aw, that I should live to see the day! [*She sets the basket down.*] Never shall we hold up our heads again! . . . Sister, we're disgraced for ever!

CAROLINE. Sister!

[*She drops into her chair and begins to weep.*

CATHERINE [*recovering her self-possession with an effort*]. Stop crying, Caroline, till I give 'e something to cry about! I can do that, I promise 'e. [*She begins her tale with a kind of melancholy gusto, and with immense volubility.*] I fancied whether something was up last week, when I see some of 'em putting their heads together and nodding and grinning upon me—Mrs Parkyn, the old venom, she was one, and Grace Budley was another, and when they two put their heads together they ben't concocting no testimonials, you may be sure. But I didn' take no notice; I'd scorn to take notice of the looks of such as they. Well, to-day I sold the chickens

—chickens are down to one-and-nine, and lucky to get that—I sold the chickens, and I bought the flour and the sugar and the meat—nice bit of fat pork and six-penn'orth of gravy beef—and everything but the butter [*getting up and taking off her hat, etc.*] : butter's terrible scarce this week ; gone up twopence, and everybody sold out, all but Mrs Parkyn—she's always the last to get rid of hers, and good reason why—well, I was bound to get *some* butter, if 'twas only her dirty old muck, so I went and bought a pound off her, and I won't say but what I might have sniffed to it a bit when I took it up ; but she didn' say nothing, not till I'd paid her and she'd got the money safe in her gown-pocket—trust her for seeing to that first—and then she said, " Very good butter, Miss Stevens," says she, daring of me, like, to say '*twasn*' very good butter, but I wasn' going to tell no lies to plaise the likes of she, you may be sure, so I said, " Us'll have to make it do, Mrs Parkyn, seeing there an't no better to be had," says I ; so then she up and say, " You didn' use to be so partic'lar," says she. " Reckon your fancy man must have a terrible delicate stomick," says she.

CAROLINE [*in horrified bewilderment*]. Fancy man ! Sister ! Whoever——

CATHERINE [*grimly*]. Only one man just hereabouts that I know by.

CAROLINE [*gasping*]. Mr Sampson !

CATHERINE [*with stony self-possession*]. That's the chap : our fancy man—yourn and mine ; and when she said the word you might have knocked me down with a feather—couldn' find a word to answer back, and I could feel myself going black-red all over. So Grace Budley—she was standing by waiting her chance, I don't doubt, the old cat—so she up and say, " Well may you blush, Cath'rine Stevens," says she. " If you'll take a friendly word from me," says she, " you'll hurry up,

you and that half-baked sister of yourn, and make the best of a poor job," says she, " and get your old Sampson to make a h-honest woman of one or the other of 'e so soon as may be," says she. [CAROLINE *screams and buries her face in her apron.* CATHERINE *shows signs of breaking down, but controls herself and continues.*] Shameful, so 'tis ! We've always kept ourselves to ourselves, and never spoke a hard word nor a scand'lous word agin nobody. How can't they leave us alone ? [*She goes to the fire and pokes it.*] Something's got to be done, and done to once too. [*After a moment's cogitation*] Where is he ?

CAROLINE [*in broken phrases, muffled by her apron and shaken with spasms*]. 'A was here just now. . . . Got something partic'lar to say to us. . . . Wouldn' say it, not till you come home. . . . Went out to look for 'e up the road.

CATHERINE. I came round by the path over the downs ; that's what made me so late. I wasn' anxious to be meeting people by the road, as you may guess. [*She sits down.*] Hm ! Got something partic'lar to say to us, have 'um ? Well, p'raps we'll have something partic'lar to say to he !

CAROLINE [*dropping her apron*]. Sister ! You'll never tell him ! I'll die of shame if you tell him !

CATHERINE [*irresolutely*]. I don't know. Something's got to be done, if only I can think what. My poor old head—'tis all of a maze !

CAROLINE [*starting up*]. Sister ! The gate ! I heard the latch ! Somebody's coming !

CATHERINE [*darting to the window*]. It's him ! He shan't come in, though ! Never agin shall he set foot in this house ! [*She rushes to the door and bolts it.*] There !

[*With eyes fixed on the door, they await the event in breathless silence. The door is tapped gently. After an interval the latch is lifted and rattled. Another pause, and* MR SAMPSON'S *voice is heard.*

MR SAMPSON. Anybody home?

CATHERINE [*going to the door and speaking through it*]. Grieved to say it, Mr Sampson, but you can't come in.

MR SAMPSON. How? What's up with 'e?

CATHERINE. I can't tell 'e, but you mustn't come in. Will 'e plaise to go away, Mr Sampson?

MR SAMPSON [*after a pause for consideration*]. No, I reckon. Not till I know what's the matter.

CATHERINE [*in despair*]. Aw, dear! I beg of 'e—go!

MR SAMPSON [*with slow emphasis*]. Not till I know what's up. If you'll open door you can tell me comfor'ble. I won't come in if you don't wish, but I'm bound to know what's up.

CATHERINE [*to* CAROLINE, *in a horrified whisper*]. He won't go! What's to be done? [CAROLINE *shakes her head miserably.*] If I should tell him—— [CAROLINE *throws up her hands in terror.*] He won't go if I don't tell him something. I'll wrap it up so well as I can. He'll be off quick enough when he know what it is. He shan't look us in the face—I'll take care of that. [*Nerving herself to the desperate act, she withdraws the bolt, opens the door an inch or so, and sets her shoulder against it.*] Keep outside, if you plaise. We can't look 'e in the face. If we must tell 'e we must, but we can never look 'e in the face agin.

MR SAMPSON. So bad as that?

CATHERINE. Worse! Worse than anything you could think for! [*With a tremendous effort*] Mr Sampson, they're talking about us.

MR SAMPSON. Us?

CATHERINE. You and we. 'Tis all over the country—scand'lous talk. Aw, that I should live to see the day!

MR SAMPSON [*patiently*]. If you'll kindly give me the partic'lars, marm.

CATHERINE [*on the verge of tears*]. We never thought no harm. 'Twas only neighbourly to offer to do for 'e,

and you all alone and so helpless. 'Tis a sin and a shame to say such things!

MR SAMPSON [*inexhaustibly patient*]. Say what things?

CATHERINE. Say—[*with a rush*]—say that 'tis high time you took and married one of us!

[*In trembling expectation they await the result. It comes—first a long low whistle; then, to their amazement, an unmistakable chuckle.* CATHERINE *shrinks back from the door; it swings open, and* MR SAMPSON *is revealed, broadly smiling.*

MR SAMPSON. That's a stale old yarn. Heard 'un weeks ago. Don't mind telling 'e, I mightn' have thought of it else.

CATHERINE [*bewildered*]. Thought of what?

MR SAMPSON [*placidly*]. Why, courting of 'e, to be sure.

CATHERINE [*gasping*]. You don't mane to say you——

MR SAMPSON. Yes, I be, though. This fortnit come Sunday, if you'll kindly take it so, and no offence. [*To* CAROLINE] The very thing I was coming in to talk about. Cur'ous how things do turn out!

CATHERINE But—we never noticed nothing.

MR SAMPSON. No—'tisn' to be supposed you would. 'Tis like the cooking, you see; I'm a terrible poor hand at it. Now 'tis out. Ben't vexed, I hope?

CATHERINE. Aw, no! But, Mr Sampson——

MR SAMPSON. There, think it over, will 'e? There's the saving to consider of, money and trouble both. And I've put by a pound or two. Not so young as I was, but we're none of us that. And not so dreadful old, nuther. Wouldn' think of parting you; reckon we could be pretty and comfor'ble together, the three of us, though, of course, I can't marry but one of 'e. So talk it over, will 'e? I'll be round agin this evening.

[*He disappears.* CAROLINE *sits down, overwhelmed.* CATHERINE, *after a moment of blank bewilderment, goes to the door and calls out.*

CATHERINE. Mr Sampson! . . . Will 'e plaise come back for a minute!

MR SAMPSON [*returning*]. Well, marm?

CATHERINE [*greatly embarrassed*]. Ascuse my asking, but—would 'e mind telling *which* one you were thinking of—of courting?

MR SAMPSON. Now you'll be laughing upon me. Which one? Well, I don't know which one, and that's the truth. [*Cheerfully*] But it don't make no odds. Settle it between yourselves; I ben't noways partic'lar.

CATHERINE [*with an involuntary giggle*]. La, Mr Sampson! Whoever heard tell of such a thing? [*She sits down.*

MR SAMPSON [*chuckling quietly*]. That's right. Laugh so much as you've a mind to. Sister laughing too? [*He peers at* CAROLINE, *who titters nervously.*] Now we're comfor'ble. Reckon I can step inside now, and no scandal. [*He shuts the door, takes a chair, spreads his hands on his knees, and surveys the sisters with a broad-beaming countenance.*] Yes, I'm like the cat in the bonfire—don't know which course to steer. I've turned it over this way, and I've rolled it over that way, and I can't come to no conclusion. Always seeing of e' together, you see, I can't part 'e nohow, no more than milk from water. But it don't matter, as I said. If you'll be so kind as to settle it up between yourselves——

CATHERINE [*emphatically*]. We couldn' do that.

MR SAMPSON [*with an inquiring glance at* CAROLINE]. Couldn' 'e, now?

CAROLINE [*shaking her head*]. 'Twouldn' be proper.

MR SAMPSON [*resignedly*]. Well, you know best. Only I don't azackly see—— Hm!

[*With his eyes on the ground, he ponders over the problem. The sisters, tensely still, stare straight before them. He lifts his head and looks in* CAROLINE'S *direction.*

CAROLINE [*hurriedly, without meeting his eye*]. Cath'rine's the best to manage things.

[*He looks hopefully at* CATHERINE.

CATHERINE [*in haste*]. Caroline's the best cook by far.

MR SAMPSON [*thumping his knee*]. That's where 'tis! The pair of 'e rolled up together'd make a complete masterpiece; a man couldn' look for a better wife than what the two of 'e'd make. That's where 'tis; nor I can't see no way out of it—not in a Christian country. [*Meditatively*] Ah, these heathen Turks—they know a thing or two arter all, don't they?

CATHERINE [*greatly shocked*]. Mr Sampson, I wonder at 'e!

MR SAMPSON. 'Tisn' to be thought of, I know that. But I can't think upon no other way. [*A bright idea strikes him.*] Without we should spin up a ha'penny and bide by the fall of 'un.

CATHERINE [*more shocked than ever*]. Never in this house!

MR SAMPSON. Don't see how we shouldn'. 'Tis just the same as casting lots, and that's a good Scripture observance. The reg'lar way with these old patriarchs, so I'm given to understand—only 'twas shekels with them, I reckon. But shekels or ha'pennies, 'tis all one.

CATHERINE [*dubiously*]. 'Tis uncommon like pitch-and-toss, and I can't fancy Abraham and Isaac a-doing of it. But if you're sure 'tis Scriptural——

MR SAMPSON. Sound Bible doctrine, my word for it! [*To* CAROLINE] An't that so, marm?

CAROLINE [*shyly*]. I mind a text in Proverbs which do say, "The lot causeth contentions to cease."

MR SAMPSON [*triumphantly*]. See there, now! "The lot causeth contentions to cease!" Aimed straight at our case! Out of Proverbs too! Old Solomon's the chap for we! See how he settled that argyment about

the baby! And there was two ladies in that! Well, then? [*He looks inquiringly at* CATHERINE, *who shakes her head dubiously, but offers no further opposition. He feels in his pocket, produces a handful of coins, chooses one, and holds it up.*] Now, if 'a should turn up the old Queen, then 'tis Cath'rine; but if 'tis the young lady with the pitch-fork, then Caroline's the one. And up she goes! [*He spins the coin, but blunders in his attempt to catch it. It falls in a corner. He goes down on his hands and knees to recover it, while the sisters sit valiantly struggling to retain their composure.*] Well, I'm darned! [*He rises to his feet, holding out the halfpenny.*] If it had been a lime-ash floor, now!

CATHERINE [*faintly*]. What's wrong?

MR SAMPSON. Fell in a crack in the floor, my dear. Sticking there edge up, and no head to 'un, nor yet no tail. Old Solomon himself couldn' make nothing by 'un. But how come you to have a timber-floor to your kitchen when mine's lime-ash?

CAROLINE. 'Twas Father's doing when the houses were built. He always liked to take his boots off of a evening, and lime-ash is that cold-natured, 'tis apt to give 'e chilblains through your stockings.

MR SAMPSON [*sitting down*]. Well, to see how things do turn out!

CAROLINE [*solemnly*]. 'Twas ordained!

CATHERINE [*with equal solemnity*]. A token, sure enough! And Father's eyes upon us this very minute, I shouldn' wonder. Mr Sampson, I doubt 'tis all foolishness, and we'd best say no more about it.

MR SAMPSON. I don't see that. If your father didn' choose to wear slippers that an't no lawful reason why I shouldn' get married if I want to. Must try some other way, that's all. [*He ponders.*

CAROLINE [*timidly*]. If we should wait a bit, Mr Sampson keeping away from us meanwhile, p'raps his heart would speak.

MR SAMPSON [*dubiously*]. So 'a might ; and then, again, 'a mightn'. A mazy old organ, 'a b'lieve.

CATHERINE. Absence makes the heart grow fonder, so they say.

MR SAMPSON. That's very well ; but how if 'a should make it grow fonder of both of 'e ? Where'd us be then ? But we'll try if you like, though I fear 'tisn' much use. [*Rising*] Queer state of things, to be sure ! Like one of these mixed-up old yarns in the story-books. Some capital yarns in these story-books, though I'm given to understand they're mostly lies ; and by what I can see——

CATHERINE [*stamping her foot*]. I've no patience with 'e, drolling along with your story-books when you ought to be down on your hands and knees asking our pardon for bringing us to such a pass ! A man of your age, and don't know how to make up his own mind ! I've no patience with 'e !

MR SAMPSON [*gazing at her admiringly*]. Ah ! Some spirit there ! You make me feel as if I was home again, living with my sister. She's just such another. Many's the time she've lerruped me across the head with the rolling-pin when I wasn' quick enough about something to plaise her. And nobody ever made a better wife than she—twice over too. I wonder, now—— [*He continues to stare reflectively at* CATHERINE, *until, on* CAROLINE'S *making an involuntary movement, he transfers his gaze to her.*] Well, I don't know. Like to like, they say, and I'm a quiet one myself. And so fur as looks do go. . . . [*He looks from one to the other, scratching his head.*] Aw, *I* don't know. [*To* CAROLINE] Well, marm, there an't nothing else for it that I can see, so we'll try your plan. [*He goes to the door and pauses there.*] All the same, I can't help wishing I'd been born a heathen Turk.

[*He goes out. The sisters remain sitting in silence. For the first time in their lives a veil of reserve*

is drawn between them, and each is obviously constrained and uncomfortable in the other's presence. CATHERINE *is the first to stir.*

CATHERINE [*rising and speaking stiffly*]. Getting on for half-past four. Time to pitch baking.

CAROLINE [*rising and going on with her preparations*]. I'll make a heavy cake, I reckon.

CATHERINE [*sniffing contemptuously*]. You can if you've a mind to. I've no opinion of your heavy cake, nor never had; you know that. But plaise yourself.

CAROLINE [*frightened, but holding her own*]. I'll make one, 'a b'lieve. [*She goes to the cupboard.*] Where's the flour?

CATHERINE. In the basket, of course? Where else should 'a be? [*She picks up the basket, sets it on the table with a bang, and distributes the various parcels, some on the table, some in the cupboard.*] There! Paddle away with your old heavy cake! I'm going to see to the chickens.

[*She goes out by the side-door.*

CAROLINE [*letting her hands fall suddenly in the midst of her preparations, and miserably appealing to the clock*]. Aw, Grandf'er! What's up with sister that she should spake so sharp to me? And what's up with me? I nearly answered her back! . . . Aw, me! [*She continues her work listlessly.*] 'Twon't be much of a cake, I fear, Grandf'er. I don't hardly know what I'm doing. . . . There! If I hadn' nearly forgot the eggs!

[*She goes out by the side-door, and returns immediately with a basket of eggs, one of which she breaks into a cup. As she is doing so* CATHERINE *returns, casts a rapid glance at the table, and hardens into stone at the sight of the egg-basket.*

CATHERINE [*in a tense whisper, pointing at the basket*]. You've been taking those Wyandotte eggs!

CAROLINE [*after a horrified pause, faintly*]. S'posing I have!

CATHERINE [*raising her voice*]. You know very well I was going to set Toppy on those eggs to-day!

CAROLINE [*trembling, and clutching the table for support*]. S'posing I did!

CATHERINE [*in a still higher key*]. Then how come you to take those eggs?

CAROLINE. I—I shall take what eggs I've a m-mind to—so there!

CATHERINE [*on her top note, without any stops*]. A mean trick so 'tis to take my eggs what I'd been saving up for Toppy and she in her box this very minute as you do very well know wearing her heart and feathers out over the chaney nest-egg, the poor fond little beauty! Of all the mean tricks, to take my eggs——

CAROLINE [*with a wretchedly poor attempt at sarcasm*]. Aw, you and your bistly old eggs! [*She bursts into tears.*

CATHERINE [*running to her*]. Sister! Sister dear! [*They embrace and mingle their tears.*] To think of it! All these years with never a cross word, and now—— Aw, drat the man!

CAROLINE [*shocked*]. Sister!

CATHERINE [*revelling in her profanity*]. Drat the man, I say! I wish we'd never set eyes upon 'um! Sarve him right if we sent him about his business.

CAROLINE. Sister! When we've both as good as promised to him! [*She sits down.*] Besides, he wouldn' go. He's awful obstinate, for all his quiet ways.

CATHERINE [*viciously*]. A week's notice'll settle him quick enough.

CAROLINE. Cath'rine, we couldn'! Good man—to be slighted by two in one day, and be turned out of house and home beside! We couldn'!

CATHERINE [*relenting*]. It do seem hard. But we can't go on like this, that's plain.

CAROLINE. P'raps he'll make up his mind after all.

CATHERINE. That'd be worse and worse. He can't

choose but one of us ; and then where'll the other be ? Tell me that.

CAROLINE [*drawing a long breath*]. Sister dear—I—I ben't in no partic'lar violence to get married.

CATHERINE [*sternly*]. Caroline Stevens, there's the Bible 'pon the shelf. Lay your hand to 'un and say that agin if you can.

CAROLINE [*hiding her face in her hands*]. I—can't !

CATHERINE. No ; and the same for me. And here we be, the two of us, careering around arter one man. At our age too—'tis shameful ! Two silly old women —that's what *we* are !

CAROLINE [*shuddering*]. Aw, don't, sister !

CATHERINE [*relentlessly*]. Two—silly—old—women ! But it shan't be so ! Thanks be, I've got some sense left in my brain, though my heart's a caudle of foolishness. It shan't be so. The longer he stay the worse 'twill be. How couldn' he make up his mind before he spoke ? 'Twouldn' have happened so then.

CAROLINE. 'Twas forced upon him to speak.

CATHERINE. So 'twas. I mustn' be hard upon him. 'Twas Doom, I reckon ; and better if Doom should keep to his battles and murders and sudden deaths, 'stead of coming and plaguing quiet, dacent folk like we. Well, Doom shan't have it all his own way, nuther. There shan't be no jalous wife nor no sinful-thoughted sister-in-law in this locality.

CAROLINE. Sister ! Such dreadful talk !

CATHERINE. 'Tis my duty to spake plain. There's bound to be suffering come out of it, but anyhow we can choose to suffer respectable. Go he shall !

CAROLINE [*at the window*]. Cath'rine ! He's coming back ! And, aw, if I do live, he've got gloves on !

CATHERINE. Gloves ! Then he've made up his mind already ! But it's too late now, and he shan't name no name, not if I can stop him. 'Twill be harder still

if we know. [*Rapidly, in a low voice*] Now, Caroline, you're too soft for this job. You leave him to me; don't say a word, and, whatever you do, don't start crying. We've got to be hard or we'll never get rid of him. Hoosh!

[*They brace themselves for the ordeal. The door opens, and* MR SAMPSON *appears. His hands are encased in enormous black kid gloves; a substantial cabbage rose adorns the lapel of his coat; his face is one consistent solid smile.*

CATHERINE [*with a rush*]. Mr Sampson, you'll kindly take a week's notice from to-day.

[*His smile slowly crumbles, and is as slowly replaced by an expression of ineffable astonishment. His eyes search the room for symptoms of universal disintegration.* CAROLINE *begins to whimper.*

MR SAMPSON [*feebly*]. I'm a dazy old bufflehead, I know; and I don't azackly seem to get to the rights o' this.

CATHERINE [*wildly*]. There an't no rights to it! *Will* 'e stop snooling, sister! 'Tis all as wrong as can be, and time to put an end to it. Nor you mustn' ask why, for we never can tell 'e. We're grieved to put 'e out in any way, and we're grieved to part with 'e; but go you must, and no questions asked.

MR SAMPSON [*collecting himself, and speaking with quiet dignity*]. If I ben't mistook, marm, there was words passed between us consarning matrimony.

CATHERINE. Foolish words! Foolisher words never were spoke! They've got to be took back.

MR SAMPSON [*continuing stolidly*]. If I ben't mistook I was told to go away and make up my mind—or my heart, as you may say—if so be I could.

CATHERINE. It's too late. Say no more about it, and we'll be thankful to 'e all our lives.

MR SAMPSON [*glancing for corroboration first at his button-*

hole, then at his gloves]. If I ben't mistook I've now returned to say I've come to a conformable conclusion at last. I've come to say—with doo respect to the other lady, who's good enough for anybody—I've come to say I've pitched my ch'ice on the lady I should wish to commit matrimony with. And the name of that lady——

CATHERINE [*interrupting him, with her hands shielding her ears*]. Don't! You mustn'! You shan't! 'Tis hard enough already; don't go to make it harder. Whichever 'tis, her answer have got to be "No." An't that so, Caroline? [CAROLINE *assents speechlessly.* CATHERINE *continues in a softer tone.*] With best thanks all the same, and hoping you won't think too hardly of us, and never shall we think other than kindly of you, and proud we'd have been, ayther one of us, if it hadn' been ordained otherwise, as you'll mind we said to once when the ha'penny stood on edge, and—— Aw, *will* 'e go, and not stand staring there like a stuck pig!

MR SAMPSON [*stiffening his back*]. Very well, marm. [*He begins peeling off his gloves.*] I ben't one to force myself on nobody. [*Intent on the gloves*] Nor I ben't going to state no grievances . . . nor ask no questions . . . nor mention no names. [*He rolls the gloves up in a ball.*

CATHERINE [*sniffing*]. You'll spile 'em. Give 'em here.

[*She takes the gloves from him, smoothes them out, lays them together, turns one neatly inside out over the other, and gives them back to him.*

MR SAMPSON. Thank 'e. Bought 'em for a funeral I didn' go to; never put 'em on till to-day. [*Putting them in his pocket*] Queer how things do turn out. . . . Well, if I got to go, then the sooner the better. [*Taking the flower from his coat and laying it on the table*] Meant for the lady of my ch'ice, not to mention no names. . . . The sooner the better; so I reckon I'll be off now. [*Fumbling in his pocket*] I can get a bed at the inn down

yonder—capital beds at the inn, so I'm told—and I'll send up for my bits of things later on. [*Counting out some silver on the table*] Three shillings—rent for this week and next, according to the law of the land.

CATHERINE [*quite overcome*]. Mr Sampson, we couldn' think of taking——

MR SAMPSON [*raising an implacable hand*]. *If* you plaise, marm, according to the law of the land, and not wishing to be beholden to nobody. And that's about all, I think. [*At the door*] Good-bye.

CATHERINE. Won't 'e shake hands before you go?

MR SAMPSON. No, I don't think so. 'Tis the Christian thing to do, I know; but there an't no mistake about it —I ought to have been born a heathen Turk.

[*He goes out. A miserable silence, broken at last by* CAROLINE'S *wailing voice.*

CAROLINE. He'll scorn us all his life!

CATHERINE [*valiantly defying her own misery*]. We've done what's right, so it don't matter what he think of us. *I* don't care, for one.

[*The discarded flower catches her eye. She takes it up and lifts it to her face.*

CAROLINE [*putting out her hand*]. Give it to me. I'll take care of it.

CATHERINE [*whipping it behind her back*]. Meant for the lady of his ch'ice. Maybe you think——

CAROLINE. I've so much right as you to think——

[*They confront each other with hostile looks. The crisis passes, with* CAROLINE *in a renewed fit of sobbing, with* CATHERINE *in resolute action.*

CATHERINE. It shan't be so! [*She goes to the fire and drops the flower in.*] And there's a end to it all, and a proper end too—dust and ashes. And now, sister, crying won't help us, but work will, or so they say else. Time to get on with the baking. Come, bustle!

[*The curtain falls as they silently set to work.*

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